DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 672 HE 027 513

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TITLE Validating Culturally Diverse Students: Toward a New Model of Learning and Student Development.
INSTITUTION National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, University Park, PA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE [93]
CONTRACT R117G10037
NOTE 29p.; For a related paper, see ED 356 000.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Academic Persistence; College Students; *Cultural Differences; Ethnic Groups; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; *Minority Groups; *Nontraditional Students; School Holding Power; *Self Concept; Student Attitudes; Student College Relationship; Student Development
IDENTIFIERS *Diversity (Student); Focus Groups Approach

ABSTRACT

This study examined minority and nontraditional college students and how new approaches to learning and student development may validate culturally diverse students and thus improve their achievement. The project interviewed 132 first-year students at four different types of institutional settings. Students were selected from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds. Students were interviewed in focus groups of 3-6 individuals for about 90 minutes using an open-ended interview protocol. A key finding was that when external agents took the initiative to validate students, academically or interpersonally, students began to believe they could be successful. Analysis explored how students who arrived expecting to fail were transformed to confident, successful students and found that: (1) traditional students had few doubts about their ability to succeed while nontraditional students and minority students did express doubts about their ability to succeed; (2) many nontraditional students needed active intervention from significant others to help them negotiate institutional life; (3) success during the first year may be contingent on whether students become involved in institutional life or whether external agents can validate students; (4) even the most vulnerable students can become powerful learners through in- and out-of-class validation; and (5) college involvement is not easy for nontraditional students. (JB)

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VALIDATING CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS: TOWARD A NEW MODEL OF LEARNING AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

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ED 371 672

For the mid-career college professor what the 1990s bring in terms of changing student demography is almost unimaginable——

- The majority of college students are women.
- A new wave of immigrants are entering schools and colleges.
- Adult students, those over 25, constitute a sizable proportion of the student body.
- African American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, American Indian and Asian students are emerging as a new student majority on some campuses.
- Sizable numbers of first-generation students (first in their family to attend college) are enrolling in college.
- Many students from families with poverty level incomes are seeking a college degree as a means to a better life.
- Non-racial student minorities such as disabled students, gays and lesbians, and Jewish students are demanding colleges and universities respond to their needs.

In stark contrast with yesterday's uniform portrait of college students as white males from privileged backgrounds, today's profile of students suggests a tapestry of differentiation in social background, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, lifestyle and sexual orientation. This has resulted not only in the colorization of

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PROJECT R117G10037
CFDA 84.117G

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the academy, but in the proliferation of a constellation of students that challenge traditional values, assumptions and conventions which have long been entrenched in the academy.

College and universities, originally designed by and for the privileged, in many ways still function as such. Student activities and organizations tend to favor traditional students who come from families where the precedent of attending college is well established. The curriculum is predominantly Euro-centered, for the most part excluding the contributions of non-whites and women. Competition, as opposed to collaboration, is stressed in teaching and learning. Instruction is largely conducted using passive techniques such as lecture that place the professor as the sole authority, and assessment tends to focus on learning outcomes as opposed to learning processes.

Given this academic scenario, it is not difficult to see why students who do not fit the traditional student profile feel so alienated and intimidated by today's college culture. When these students enter college as strangers in a strange land, they are faced with unlearning past behaviors and attitudes while learning new practices, values and conventions that are quite removed from their worlds. Indeed, these students become strangers in a learning paradise--at once experiencing the exuberance and wonder of the intellectual world, and the agony and trauma that come from having to unlearn the past and assume a new identity.

I. STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

Two stories illustrate how students who come as strangers to the academy negotiate the transition to college in order to attain academic success. The first is the case of Richard Rodriguez whose controversial, powerful story is told in Rodriguez' autobiographical essay "Coming Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy" (1975) and in his equally potent book, Hunger of Memory (1982). The second is my own story as captured in my essay "From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American Scholarship Girl" (1992).

These two stories relate the triumphs and tragedies of students who crossed cultural boundaries and substantiate the notion that higher education can have both an upside and downside. The transition to college is negotiated in different ways by different students. Both Rodriguez and I are first generation college students, but the way we dealt with the passage to college is quite different. For students like Richard Rodriguez, academic success becomes contingent upon separating from the past, from assimilating into the academy, and from shedding or masking as much of their culture as they can in order to be accepted. Rodriguez empathized with the image of the "scholarship boy" he read in Richard Hoggart's (1970) Uses of Literacy--a student who can succeed in college only if he replaces allegiance to his native culture with loyalty to a new academic culture. "In the end, he must choose between two worlds: if he intends to succeed as a student, he must, literally and figuratively, separate himself from his family, with its gregarious life, and find a quiet place to be with his thoughts...For the loss he might otherwise feel, the scholarship boy substitutes an enormous enthusiasm for nearly everything having to do with school" (Rodriguez, 1975, p. 17).

Rodriguez' experience is not uncommon, for strangers to the academy must often find coping mechanisms to deal with the demands placed on them. Higher education is set up so that students most likely to succeed are those that can successfully disconnect from the past and turn over their loyalty to the conventions and practices of the academy which may have little or nothing to do with the realities from which students come.

However, my own story illustrates that academic success can be attained without total disconnection, although many educators either do not want to accept this or fail to recognize this. Like Rodriguez, when I started to attend college, I found myself living between two worlds, leaving old friends behind and changing my identity. For me, going to college was not very "normal." It represented a break from family traditions. I was the first in my family to attend college, as my parents had only gone to the second and third grade.

This is the downside of going to college that both Rodriguez and I experienced. But unlike Rodriguez, I have learned that the past constitutes a large part of my identity, that I need not give up my language or culture in order to succeed in

American education, and that past experience constitutes a rich resource that I bring to the academic culture. What I have learned outside the academy is equally, and often more important than what I have learned in college classrooms.

Equally important to recognize is that nontraditional students enter the academy consumed with doubt about their ability to succeed. At every transition point, from the first year of college to the first year of graduate school, students like me are quite vulnerable to in- and out-of-class experiences that humiliate us or reinforce doubt in us. Subtle, yet very powerful messages still permeate the academy. We hear loud and clear that only white men can do science and math; that only the "best and the brightest" deserve to be educated; that minority students are in college simply because they "got a break;" that white students are inherently smarter than non-whites; that allowing people of color to enter college diminishes academic excellence and quality.

When I entered the University of Michigan to undertake doctoral study, I remember being overwhelmed by its intellectual ethos. I remember listening to my white student counterparts talk about their undergraduate experiences in liberal arts colleges and prestigious universities that appeared to be of greater quality than the institutions I had attended. I wondered whether I could truly compete with these students whose experiences and cultural realities were so different from my own. Indeed, the way higher education is organized and the way instruction is delivered favors traditional students.

The model with which the academy operates is based on what the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenkey, et. al., 1986) describe as the "masculine myth." It is a competitive, male-based model where the scholarship boy/man is admitted into the fraternity of powerful knowers only when he has learned to think in complex, abstract ways, when he has learned to recognize that experience, based on the past, is a source not of strength, but of error. Students are socialized to believe that doubt precedes belief and that separation leads to connection. The great lesson learned is that cultural separation leads to academic power.

The cost of buying into this model is, of course, enormous. Students must tolerate the pain and humiliation of being doubted, of coming to terms with the trauma associated with changing cultural beliefs and practices, of being dismissed as uninformed, stupid or lazy, of being tested and retested in ways that create fear and/or reinforce doubt. But what educators fail to recognize is that fear may be the greatest obstruction to student learning and growth. For nontraditional students, it is important that from the very beginning of their college careers, professors express a sincere belief that students are capable of learning and can be taught to learn. I have learned that higher education need not inflict pain on students, that in fact students will perform better when they are valued as individuals and as members of their unique communities and cultures.

My story's lesson is that it is not only students who must adapt to a new culture, but that institutions must allow themselves to be changed by foreign cultures. In the 1990s, as higher education wrestles with accommodating a new student majority and reorganizes for diversity, it becomes imperative to understand the complex issues students confront as they enter the world of college. More importantly, it becomes important to determine what institutions can do to develop a new model of student learning and development that is more appropriate for the rapidly changing profile of students entering the academy.

II. THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE PROJECT

The Transition to College Project was designed primarily to determine how student learning was affected by student involvement in academic and non-academic experiences in college. In particular, the project was interested in assessing the influences of students' out-of-class experiences on learning and retention. The need to conduct this study emerged out of Astin's (1985) work on student involvement and by Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) review of the last 20 years of research on the effects of college on students. Astin's view that students will learn more as they become involved in investing psychological and physical energy in "objects" such as tasks, people and activities is widely known and supported.

Much of the research in this area is focused on in-class issues such as curriculum, classroom and faculty. However, Pascarella and Terenzini's review of research (1991) found that informal, out-of-class interactions with peers, faculty members and participation in extra-curricular activities played an important role in shaping student learning, attitudes, values and orientation toward learning, in both specific and general ways.

Given the important role of in- and out-of-class experiences on student learning and growth, the Transition to College Project of the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment sought to address two general questions:

1. How do students become active and involved participants in the academic community?

2. How do students' out-of-class experiences, particularly their interpersonal interactions, reinforce, augment or attenuate curricular and classroom learning and achievement of broader general education goals?

The researchers interviewed a total of 132 first-year students in a predominantly minority community college in the southwest, a predominantly white, residential, liberal arts college in a middle Atlantic state, a predominantly black, urban, commuter, comprehensive state university in the midwest, and a large, predominantly white, residential, research university in a middle Atlantic state. Along with the author, researchers included Patrick T. Terenzini, Kevin Allison, Susan B. Millar, M. Lee Upcraft, Patti Gregg and Romero Jalomo.

Students were selected from diverse personal and academic backgrounds. No attempt was made to select random samples. Rather, groups of students consisting of individuals with specified characteristics appropriate to the overall entering student population on each campus such as females, males, commuting students, African American students, Hispanic students, etc. were selected by an institutional contact person. Students were interviewed in focus groups of 3-6 for about one and one-half hours on campus.

An open-ended interview protocol was designed for this study. Questions pertained to how students made decisions to attend college; their expectations for, and the reality of, college; significant people and events in their transition; selected characteristics of the transition; and general effects students felt college was having on them.

Data Analysis

All interview sessions were tape-recorded, and members of the research team transcribed and/or summarized the tapes. Interview data were analyzed using a grounded or inductive theory generation approach where a conceptual framework could be generated from the data (Glaser and Straus, 1967).

Both individual and research team analyses of the transcripts of over 200 pages were conducted. Themes were identified and classified, with an emphasis on identifying themes that were common across campuses and student sub-groups, as well as thematic differences that were distinctive to a campus setting or student subgroup. The findings were compared with involvement theory, as a means to test the notion that involvement was key to transforming students into successful learners.

Since these respondents do not represent a scientific sample of two- and four-year college students, generalizations beyond the sample cannot be made. However, the study can provide depth of understanding of the diversity of student learning experiences and developmental growth patterns, as well as provide a guide toward future research and better practice at the institutional level.

III PURPOSE OF REPORT

As this study progressed, it became clear that how students got involved in college told only part of the story about student learning and growth. Carefully analyzing student responses led to an even more interesting dynamic: how nontraditional students who came to college expecting to fail suddenly began to

believe in their innate capacity to learn and to become successful college students.

This article focuses on how students who come to the academy consumed with self-doubt or expecting to fail are being transformed into students excited about higher learning. The ground-breaking study of women as learners, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986), provided the most important perspectives to this analysis. In their study of "ordinary" women, the researchers found that women who had been treated as stupid or incompetent yearned for acceptance and validation.

IV. TRANSFORMING CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS THROUGH VALIDATION

Interviews with students from diverse race/ethnic and cultural backgrounds yielded five important findings:

1. Traditional students expressed few, if any concerns about succeeding in college, while nontraditional students, particularly those in a community college and a predominantly African American four-year college, communicated some doubts about their ability to succeed .

2. Some students are quite independent and can function within academic and social infrastructures quite easily, but many nontraditional students need active intervention from significant others to help them negotiate institutional life.

3. Success during the critical first year of college appears contingent upon whether students can get involved in institutional life on their own or whether external agents can validate students, in an academic and/or interpersonal way.

4. Even the most vulnerable nontraditional students can be transformed into powerful learners through in- and out-of-class academic and/or interpersonal validation.

5. Involvement in college is not easy for nontraditional students. Validation may be the missing link to involvement, and may be a prerequisite for involvement to occur.

Doubt, Invalidation, and Structure

We asked students "what did you expect and what did you find when you got here?" Many nontraditional students talked about wanting their doubts about being capable of learning erased. This was especially true for community college students, first generation students, Hispanic and African American students, and students who had been out of college for some time. Students also talked about wanting structure and they related some in- and out-of-class invalidating experiences.

A community college student expressed why she enrolled in a two-year college, as opposed to a university: "Personally, I think I was unprepared for classes like English. I took my assessment test and I thought I was unprepared. I wasn't prepared in high school at all...The way you do homework ...is different in high school. I couldn't have done it in a university."

One returning woman said: "I expected to fail. Two weeks and I was out. I didn't think I could study. I didn't think I could learn." One student felt she would be "just a number." Another community college student said she chose the college "because I saw my brother go to a four-year college and he barely made it. He said it's hard. His advice was to go to a community college."

Students also talked about invalidating situations they had encountered both in- and out-of-class. An African American woman attending a community college with a GED who had faked her resume to get a job on Wall Street discussed an out-of-class invalidating experience:

I went to secretarial school and I started working on Wall Street for an investment firm. I went in as a file clerk. Climbing up the ladder up there is very easy, all you have to have is personality, a little charm. And within about two or three years, I was making my $35,000-$40,000 a year...I've

always been quick on my feet. So it was nothing for me to excel in New York...People are willing to teach you. But when I came to [the south] I was made to realize that I was a young black woman with hardly any education...I was used to working with people who made big money and they trusted me with decisions. Like people would call in for brokers and the broker was not there. If the client had money invested in a particular stock even though I was not a broker I could go in and transfer or give them a piece of IBM or AT&T. So...to come [to university where she worked] and have someone speak to me as if I had the education of a five year old...that was a real bummer.

Still other students talked about invalidating experiences in the classroom. Said one community college student: **"My math teacher...he has a number...I was a number, you know, instead of calling us by name, he would call us by our social security number. There aren't many people in class for him to go through all that and it's quicker for him to say my name than my number."**

Four-year college students also commented on the chilly academic climate, but recognized its inevitability at least to some degree. One student expressed: **"When you come here...and then you find that you're one of 800 (that's my largest class), but there's no way the teacher can possibly know everybody, and I don't think he really knows anybody's name...That's what we bargained for when we came to a big school."**

Several students also felt frustrated about what they perceived as "coldness" from some faculty and students. They were disappointed when faculty would offer to meet with them only to be told later they were "busy," treated them "like statues," and they complained that some staff could be very short-tempered with students.

Those students whose transition to college had been particularly difficult expressed the need for structure. Said one returning woman: **"It was a big shock to my system because I had to put my children in day care and to be away from them, [and] come to a structured...[environment]..it isn't like going to work, you know. I'm a cosmetologist by trade...It's structured but I needed that. I needed structure in my life at the time when it was all out of**

killer and it was a big change but it was something I adapted to. I found I couldn't study at home. I had to study here on campus because if my little ones saw mommy, they didn't want mommy to study a lot, you know. I had to make those adjustments."

Community college students were especially concerned about structure in a mature college environment. One student told the interviewer: **"I expected a more mature environment as far as the students. Me coming straight out of high school, I was like going to a little college...I thought people would be friendlier and a little more mature, you know, [for] a lot of them this is their second or third year here and they're still playing the high school and junior high school games. I was not looking for that."**

V. THE ROLE OF VALIDATION

With nontraditional students expressing doubt, as well as the need to be confirmed and to find structure, we wondered who or what was setting the pace for transforming students into powerful learners. Certainly, the study showed that those students who became involved in the social and academic fabric of the institution appeared to be more excited about learning. These were students who met with their instructors regularly and who were members of clubs and organizations.

But not all students, particularly those who find the transition to college difficult and those who are unaccustomed to taking advantage of opportunities to participate in academic and social infrastructures, can involve themselves easily in college. What we learned is that when external agents took the initiative to validate students, academically and/or interpersonally, students began to believe they could be successful. Students were getting their validating experiences both in- and out-of-class. What occurred outside of class (at home, at work setting, in the patio area, etc.) was often equally important as what occurred within the confines of the classroom environment.

In-Class Academic Validation

Specific actions of an academic nature that occurred in-class helped students trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student. The role of faculty in fostering academic validation was especially important. Examples of in-class academic validation include:

- faculty who demonstrated a genuine concern for teaching students
- faculty who were personable and approachable toward students
- faculty who treated students equally
- faculty who structured learning experiences that allowed students to experience themselves as capable of learning
- faculty who worked individually with students who needed extra help
- faculty who provided meaningful feedback to students

All of these faculty-initiated actions of an academic nature fostered student attitudes and behaviors that led to academic development. The most need for academic validation was expressed by community college students and students attending a predominantly black, urban university.

A returning woman at a community college describes her transforming experience: **"I was amazed at... what I had preconceived that college would be like. I did not believe that the instructors would be so personable with each individual and want to teach you--want to teach you. I thought it was like what I've heard U. is like, where you go out there and they don't care whether you come in or out or whatever, you're just a number, and they don't care whether you learn or not, it's up to you to learn. And here people are helping us to get out minds in order to where we can learn. It's a process. It's like a nurturing process."**

The kinds of academic experiences in which faculty had students participate also served as validation mechanisms. A white community college woman conveyed that her most important experience was viewing herself on tape in front of a

group. She said: **"I don't know quite how to say this, but when you hear yourself talk... and you observe this individual that has blossomed into something that I hadn't even been aware...I would sit in awe and say, 'that's me. Look at you.' and I like me."**

A black community college student explained his validating experience with his English teacher: **"Like most teachers, they consider my failings. They just come to school because they have to get paid. She came to school to teach you. Plus you had hard times and she understood. It was like if you couldn't come to class one day, the only thing you had to do was call her...If something was wrong, she could tell you how she felt. That's what teachers need to do more. Some treat you like you're a statue."**

This was a student who had never passed his English class before and now he expressed, **"When I look at my report card, I want to go to school."**

Faculty were not the only in-class validating agents. A young African American student recounts the support a classmate gave him at an urban four-year college classroom:

Recently I got a C on a test in zoology where I was an A student there. And I was, "give up!" You know, and I cried a little bit. I was ticked off. And then I had someone constantly behind me saying, "You're going to do this. Sit down and study, and you can do it! Don't worry about it.

Out-of-Class Academic Validation

In the absence of in-class validating experiences, some students were able to turn to out-of-class validating agents. A traditional-aged urban university student spoke of the most important person in his life: **"The single most important person in my life right now is my mother. She's the type of person that does any and everything for her two children. And she has sacrificed. And she feels that my education and my well-being, as well as my brother's is the utmost importance. And with that type of parenting, or that type of**

support, even if you do not finish your goals, you will know that it wasn't because you didn't have any support."

Many students spoke of the impact validating agents were having on them outside of class. Asked about the most important people in his life, an African American student in a special medical program at an urban university responded:

I would say the people in [program] that we met over the summer...We're constantly pushing each other because everybody is going into some type of medical field. It's real rough, and I'm not lying, because you have to spend a lot of time studying, and we'll call each other and have study groups often, just constantly reviewing everything because everybody's like, you know, striving to do a little bit better...And they call us the three musketeers, even though there's actually four or five of us usually. We all stick together, trying to push each other.

Interpersonal Validation In Class and Outside of Class

Validating actions of an interpersonal nature that fostered personal and social adjustment occurred both inside and outside of class. While both traditional and nontraditional students expressed the need for interpersonal validation, it was interesting to note that many students from a large research university talked about the importance of interpersonal validation. Faculty, friends, parents and siblings played particularly important roles in interpersonal validation. Some examples follow:

An Anglo freshman attending a community college told about the most important person in her life:

You know, when I came in, my communications instructor became like an idol to me. Not an idol, but a living example of what I would like to be. In front of people, when she conducts a class and she articulates herself with such poise and she has the self-esteem and you can just see all of that radiate--when I came to school, my life had fallen apart and I didn't really have structure or direction. She gave me direction with which I wish to

mold myself...I do know my own mind, and that helped by taking that communications class and by watching her interact with many different types of people and still be herself.

Asked who were the most important people in her life, a student at a large state university said:

On our floor there are 7-8 of us who are friends on the floor who are always around. We know that if one of us has a problem everyone is going to be there to deal with whatever needs to be dealt with. It's your friends at school who you're going to depend on most.

Another woman at the same university said:

My family is very important, but they push me to get good grades. And sometimes if I don't get such good grades I feel like I can't talk to them about it, so I always have my friends. The weird thing is that my best friend since sixth grade lives next door to me...And if I have a problem, I go on next door and sit myself down and talk to her for hours.

VI. TOWARD A DEFINITION OF VALIDATION

Involvement and validation appear to have distinct elements. In Involvement In Learning (1984) involvement is defined "how much time, energy, and effort students devote to the learning process (p. 17)." Research now indicates that the more time and effort students devote to learning and the more intensely they engage in their own education, the greater their achievement, satisfaction with educational experiences and persistence in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987; Astin, 1984).

Highly involved students devote considerable energy to studying, work on campus, participate actively in student organizations and interact frequently with faculty members and student peers. Conversely, uninvolved students often neglect studies, spend little time on campus, abstain from extracurricular activities and have little contact with their faculty and peers (Study Group on the

Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984). Involvement appears to have the following dimensions: First, it is something that students are expected to do on their own. Second, the role of the institution in fostering involvement is passive--it simply affords students the mechanisms, i.e., organizations, tutoring centers, extracurricular activities, etc. to get involved.

What many students related in this study differs from involvement. What had transformed these students were incidents where some individual, either in-or out-of-class, took an active interest in them--when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work and that supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment. It appears that nontraditional students do not perceive involvement as them taking the initiative. They perceive it when someone takes an active role in assisting them. The role of the institution in fostering validation is active--it involves faculty, counselors, coaches, and administrators actively reaching out to students or designing activities that promote active learning and interpersonal growth among students, faculty and staff.

It is important to note that the student quotations used in this article illustrate extreme examples of the in-class/out-of-class and academic/interpersonal validation continuum. Yet, careful analysis of data often yields an overlap between and among these dynamics. Validation may be said to have the following elements:

1. Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development.

2. When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self worth and feel that they and everything that they bring to the college experience is accepted and recognized as valuable. Lacking validation, students feel crippled, silenced, subordinate and/or mistrusted.

3. Like involvement, validation is a prerequisite to student development.

4. Validation can occur both in- and out-of-class. In-class validating agents include faculty, classmates, lab instructors and teaching assistants. Out-of-class validating agents can be 1) significant others, such as spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend, 2) family members, such as parents, siblings, relatives and children and 3) friends, such as classmates and friends attending and not attending college 4) college staff, including faculty who meet with students out-of-class, counselors/advisors, coaches, tutors, teaching assistants, and resident advisors.

5. Validation suggests a developmental process. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated, the richer the academic and interpersonal experience.

6. Validation is most effective when offered early on in the student's college experience, during the first year of college and during the first weeks of class. However, validation should continue throughout the college years.

Expecting students to involve themselves with the social and academic infrastructures of an institution will work only for students who have the skills to gain access to these opportunities. Clearly, some students will be able to get involved on their own. But merely offering opportunities for involvement will not work for passive students or for those who do not know how to take full advantage of the system. What is needed is the active academic and interpersonal validation of these students--a process that affirms, supports, enables and reinforces their capacity to fully develop themselves as students and as individuals.

VII. TOWARD A NEW MODEL OF STUDENT LEARNING AND GROWTH

The needs and strengths of the new wave of students pose a difficult challenge to college professors, counselors and administrators as they rethink the old model of student learning and growth. Old ideas, practices and conventions that have nothing to do with today's students die hard in the academy. But die they must. And they must be replaced with new policies and practices that are

tailored to a new student majority that bears little resemblance to the student of days gone by.

A great deal of invalidation is built into the present model of teaching and learning found in most two- and four-year institutions. Calling students by social security numbers, discounting life experiences, detaching faculty from students, promoting fiercely competitive environments that pit students against each other, are just some examples of invalidating situations students experience. This forces students to seek validation outside of class. The effect that out-of-class validation agents have on students is incalculable. Parents who provide consistent encouragement, spouses who are supportive, peers who lend a helping hand--all of these validating agents act to suppress the invalidation students may be receiving in class.

Nontraditional students who get no validation or who experience invalidating situations in class will likely rely on out-of-class validation to carry them through. However, not all students are able to get out-of-class validation. In fact some students may actually be invalidated outside the classroom. Some minority students related how their friends made them feel like they were wasting their time attending college. Some family members actually discourage students from going to college. These are among the most fragile students who, in the absence of both in- and out-of-class validation, will likely leave college.

The most promising finding of this study is that faculty and staff can transform even the most vulnerable students into powerful learners who are excited about learning and attending college. What can community colleges, colleges and universities do to transform students who would otherwise leave college?

1. **Orient faculty and staff to the needs and strengths of culturally diverse student populations.**

    - Provide faculty with a yearly demographic profile of the institution's student population. For example, what percent: are first generation students; come from working class families; are disabled? What are the unique needs and concerns diverse students are expressing?

- Hold faculty development workshops that focus on understanding student differences, commonalties and issues of interest to diverse cultural groups. Focused discussions of the multiple issues nontraditional students bring to college and how to address them should be part of faculty development workshops.

- Assist faculty to serve as validating mentors for students who find the transition to college difficult.

2. **Train faculty to validate students.**

Faculty need to understand that they are among the most crucial validating agents and that when they validate students they contribute to the transformation of students. Faculty need to learn:

- How to validate students in- and out-of-class

- The importance of validating early on, during the first month of class, and continuing to validate students throughout their college years

- How to get involved and stay connected with students

- How to understand student cultural histories, as well as life experiences, and how to incorporate them into the teaching and learning environment.

- How to structure student learning experiences so that students can see themselves as capable, powerful learners

- How to create a supportive, caring classroom environment without patronizing students or lowering standards.

- How to incorporate multiple perspectives in the classroom, including those of women and men, people of color, gays and lesbians and the

disabled. The key here is to foster a classroom environment that allows the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives in the curriculum and/or class discussions.

3. **Foster a validating classroom.**

To create a validating classroom, faculty must rethink the traditional model of teaching and learning. Despite the fact that the student profile is changing, faculty continue to rely on an old model that forces students to assimilate, to compete against each other, to remain passive participants in learning and to believe that separation leads to academic power. Figure 1 depicts elements of an academic invalidating model and how this can be replaced by academic validating elements.

College faculty are known to balk at the idea of "spoon feeding" students and to believe that all students must be held accountable for their own actions no matter what their past experience has been. While there is some truth to this, the idea of validating students is not to patronize or lower standards to the point that students become weak. The idea is to unleash the power of learning that is present in all human beings and to challenge students to behave responsibly.

The key to transforming students is to remove obstacles to learning, to instill in students a sense of trust in their ability to learn, to liberate students to express themselves openly even in the face of uncertainty, and to know that the way they construct knowledge is as valid as the way others construct knowledge. The validating classroom empowers students, connects faculty with students and creates an atmosphere of trust, respect and freedom to learn.

4. **Foster a therapeutic learning community both in- and out-of-class.**

Many of today's students are negotiating the multiple demands of work, family, culture and school. They are also struggling with adjusting to necessary losses associated with making the transition to college. They yearn for acceptance into the community of learners. Consequently, it is important that validation

mechanisms that foster student growth and development co-exist with those that foster academic development.

Unfortunately, not all social and interpersonal situations students encounter in- or out-of- college are positive in nature. Parker Palmer has advocated the building of therapeutic communities in college. To build a therapeutic learning community, colleges need to replace invalidating interpersonal situations with those that validate students. Figure 2 presents ways that students encounter interpersonal invalidating situations in the college environment, as well as ways that colleges can promote the validation of students at the interpersonal level.

There is no reason why institutional life cannot be therapeutic in nature. A college culture that promotes healthy relationships among students, faculty and staff, fosters cultural pride and recognizes the potential of all students to attain success is key to the full development of today's college students.

VIII CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that nontraditional students, no matter how fragile, can be transformed into full members of the college academic and social community. The importance of this finding cannot be over stated, for it points to real hope for students who do not see themselves as "college material" or who feel that college life has little or nothing to do with the realities from which they come. What is needed to transform these students is for faculty, administrators and counselors to fully engage in the validation of students and to recognize that not all students can be expected to learn or to get involved in institutional life in the same way. Diversity in nature is a strength. So is diversity among college students. The challenge is how to harness that strength and to unleash the creativity and exuberance for learning that is present in all students who feel free to learn, free to be who they are and validated for what they know and believe.

Figure 1
Fostering A Validating Classroom

ACADEMIC INVALIDATING MODEL	ACADEMIC VALIDATING MODEL
1. Students treated as empty receptacles and/or as incapable of learning.	1. Students bring rich reservoir of experience and are motivated to believe they are capable of learning.
2. Students expected to disconnect with the past.	2. The past is a source of strength and knowledge.
3. Faculty assault students with information and/or withhold information	3. Faculty share knowledge with students and support students in learning.
4. Faculty instill doubt and fear in students.	4. Faculty structure learning so that students are able to see themselves as powerful learners.
5. Faculty are experts, the sole source of truth and authority.	5. Faculty are partners in learning with students.
6. Students are oppressed, silenced and cast in subordinate roles.	6. Students are allowed to have a public voice and share their ideas openly.
7. Faculty focus on abstract thinking.	7. Faculty recognize the importance of experience as a base of knowledge and that out-of-class learning is equally powerful.
8. Students are passive.	8. Faculty employ active learning techniques such as collaborative learning, demonstrations, simulations, field trips etc.

Figure 1
Fostering A Validating Classroom

ACADEMIC INVALIDATING MODEL

9. Evaluation instills fear and is objective and impersonal.
10. Faculty and students remain separated.
11. The classroom is fiercely competitive.
12. Fear of failure permeates the classroom environment.
13. Teaching is linear, flowing only from teacher to student.
14. Students validated at the end of the term.
15. The core curriculum is male-centered and Euro-centered.
16. Students encouraged to give automated and rote responses.

ACADEMIC VALIDATING MODEL

9. Learning standards are designed in collaboration with students and students are allowed to re-do assignments until they master them. Faculty praise success and encourage motivation.
10. Faculty and students interact frequently.
11. Students work together in teams and are encouraged to share information.
12. A climate of success is fostered by faculty and students.
13. Teachers may be learners; learners may be teachers.
14. Students validated early and validation continues throughout college years.
15. The core curriculum is inclusive of the contributions of women and minorities.
16. Learning allows for reflection, multi-perspectives and imperfection.

Figure 2
Fostering A Therapeutic Learning Community

INTERPERSONAL INVALIDATING MODEL

1. Students expected to get involved in institutional life on their own.
2. Cliques/exclusive groups are allowed to form.
3. The college climate is perceived as sexist, racist and/or intolerant of certain students.
4. The college climate is cold and insensitive.
5. Students are expected to shed their culture.
6. Few opportunities are available for out-of-class involvement.
7. Students feel stressed, unable to make decisions.
8. Students feel isolated.
9. Students feel unloved and unsupported.

INTERPERSONAL VALIDATING MODEL

1. Faculty and staff actively reach out to students to help them get involved in college.
2. All students considered important and equal. Student organizations and activities are open to all groups.
3. The college promotes pride in cultural, gender and sexual orientation through college sponsored activities and organizations.
4. Faculty and staff are available to students in-and-out of class.
5. Cultural pride is recognized and fostered in-and out-of-class.
6. Faculty and staff meet with students at athletic events, in cafeterias, patio areas, in tutoring centers, in the library, etc.
7. Counselors meet with students to teach them stress management, decision-making techniques, and college coping skills.
8. Students encouraged to help each other, i.e. providing positive reinforcement, forming friends during orientation, living with and interacting with peers.
9. Events that bring families together with students (i.e., achievement nights, athletic events, etc.) are held throughout the year.

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